

# Treasure Trail

By Frederick Niven

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## CHAPTER II

### Piccolo's Left-hand Pocket

When they had ridden well of the lines to the horn producing his pipe filled it the last grains of his tobacco store and some shreds of bark to eke it out.

Hospitable old son of a gun, "Scotty," said he. "I'd have had him for a fill of my pipe as the saying goes, 'avoid very appearance of bum-'"

His Margaret is sure a beauty. I was up there one night in Movie Bill was showing old man a collection of arrowheads, and say—

—was beauty and the beast all," said Piccolo.

"I guess," agreed Tremaine, "Movie Bill is sure homely to you."

"Homely!" piped Piccolo. "I wonder why they call him Movie?"

Has he been mixed up in these flicker pictures? Why, you Welsh innocent."

"You know? Don't you know, it take a fall, see it, without asking?"

"'s because he's so tough—Piccolo opened wide his eyes and shook his head.

"Tremaine," he exclaimed, "Tremaine, he'd make the star man for the star movie."

Got that? Well, how foolish of me!" Piccolo.

He too had dropped the lines to the horn. When shaking the horn from his right-hand pocket he had put out all its contents, as we know, into the left pocket; and he began, as he rode, to take inventory of what bulked him out so greatly.

A jack-knife, an aluminum tobacco box, a pipe with a stub of pipe, a grey with dirt. He held it in his hand and put them in the empty pocket to right.

When he delved again into the pocket and rummaged, Tremaine waved a hand in and struck a match on his thumb-nail in an easy gesture.

Benwell once said to me," remarked, "that he didn't think Movie Bill was as tough as he looked. Guess he imagined as kind of leery of him. I think some one has come along who can be made a jest of."

But suddenly that look passed. He glanced down toward some fragments of rock that Piccolo, with almost a shy gesture, had flicked to the earth, foolishly clearing out that left-hand pocket.

At the veranda's end, a little apart, sat, with a book in hand, surely the plainest man—to a superficial first gaze at any rate—that you ever chapped eyes on. He was a daring man to be reading a book when Mark was around; for Bantling, in that condition, was ready to haze men he thought weaklings; and he was also the kind of man to think reading anything beyond a catalogue of six-guns a simpleton's employment. But the face of the man at the veranda's end was, whether as bluff or not, not a face to inveigle Mark, drunk or sober. He could even have read a book of poems, with a face like his, in security from Mark's joshing. He held the book with a finger in place and under his brows considered, not the boob who had sidetracked Piccolo, but Mark Bantling.

Those deep-set grey eyes saw much. A lonely man by reason of his features. He was plainer than the famous Cyrano de Bergerac—to a superficial consideration; though once, to be sure, in a pullman of the Great Northern spinning through Montana, when Frederic Remington got on at Glendive and saw that face, he produced his notebook and sketched surreptitiously. "Isn't he fierce?" asked his companion. "Fierce!" said Remington.

"Why, that's character! Character! That's what he has. It's not a bad face. For myself I'd trust myself in the last ditch with him but," and he laughed, "he'll remain a bachelor I expect."

Movie Bill, he of this interesting countenance, had noted Mark

"I'll just side-step, then," said Piccolo. "I'll catch you up."

"Take care of yourself, you innocent Welshman, though I don't see you can come to much harm."

Tremaine rode on, and Piccolo turned aside to the scatter of houses called Colvalli—a general store, a drug store with a few magazines in the window, and a hardware store, each with a ringed hitching pole before it—for Colvalli is in the beginning of the rolling prairie country of Washington beyond the Rockies and before the Coast ranges.

"I see you got your horses," said a man who has nothing to do with this story except that he was the boob, as one might say, who stopped Piccolo.

The fact was evident, the remark uncalled for. Piccolo did not know what to reply; so he said "Oh yes, got our horses."

"Well!" said the silly fellow. Piccolo, absently clearing out his left-hand pocket, stared at him.

"Well," he said genially. Tremaine would have said, in response to the first remark: "You see them don't you?" and in response to the second: "How many wells would make a river?"

But Piccolo was not that kind of man—with no aspersion on either. They were made a shade differently, that was all.

All the men on the Benwell House veranda were made a shade differently too. Some grinned at the fool, some at Piccolo some at both. Some didn't grin, at all. Some paid no attention, or appeared to pay no attention.

Piccolo could take care of himself in an emergency, but he did not like "toughs", and he was sorry he had drawn aside from the road, for on the veranda were two definite toughs, to wit Alfred Greer and Mark Bantling whom Tremaine had mentioned but a few minutes before. Of the latter it was common knowledge that he knew all about the menu in the penitentiary, and of the former that he ought to if he did not. And Mark had clearly had recent traffic with a bootlegger. He was in the condition known as "lit up".

He looked as if he was on the point of speaking to Piccolo; he had a grin of the kind a certain type of man shows when he thinks some one has come along who can be made a jest of.

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Bantling's smile. He felt perhaps more pity than contempt for Piccolo's shyness. If Mark should try to haze him he, Movie Bill, would act in that play. He might, or might not be a tough too; but whether he was or was not he felt a sense of antipathy to Mark Bantling, seeing him leer on the young man of the high voice. He was no self-analyst like Angus MacPherson. He did not ask himself whether dislike for Mark or pity for Piccolo the more moved him.

Then he saw a change of expression on Bantling's face. He saw him glance towards his partner, Greer. He saw the fragment of a nod Greer gave, subtle, tiny, little more than a drop of eyelids; and he saw their eyes on the stones dusted from Piccolo's pocket.

"Been far!" asked Green. "Oh, quite a ways."

"Where did you get them?" Somehow it came easier to Piccolo, thus cross-questioned (and inwardly just a hint annoyed at being cross-questioned), to repeat Jack Tremaine's way of telling of the distance of their journey than to give it counting the miles from Colvalli.

"In an air-line maybe eighty miles north—," he began.

"Gosh!" broke out Bantling, and so interrupted Pete's thin voice which was going on to say:—"of the Boundary."

"That ain't so darn far!" Bantling went on. "You were just a little way over the Boundary into B. C., I guess. Colvalli is about fifty south of it."

"I guess!" piped Piccolo. That slight annoyance at having been called over for nothing and a little additional annoyance over interrogations by these men

whom he had always avoided, made it a matter of moonshine to him, of no consequence whatever, that they had an erroneous impression of how far the bunch of horses had strayed. Then, his pony fidgeting, he took the advice of its impatience, flicked a line and rode on, back to the road and went lippety-lope away off after his partner, Jack Tremaine.

A bell rang indoors. The men came down from the tilt one by one. Chairs scraped, feet shuffled. They moved to eat. Alfred Greer and Mark Bantling and Movie Bill alone remained, the latter with his finger still in his book, eyes shut now, legs extended, at ease.

The two toughs—more than alleged—looked at him. Then Mark took off his hat, tossed it spinning up in air, caught it, repeated that action once or twice till the hat fell over the veranda, then lurched down to retrieve it. As he stooped Movie Bill rose so as to be high enough to see what he did down there. And so he

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They were by that time near the scattered houses of Colvalli, the road winding them in the Benwell House as they past. Across the short distance they could see a row of figures in tilted chairs, heel to heel.

"Seems we're welcome again," said Piccolo. "Who hollered?"

"I don't know and I don't know," answered Jack. "I'm going on. Tell them how-do for if you want to stop."